

Headline	Conquering 250km for a cause		
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Conquering 250km for a cause

By Audrey Edwards

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HE spends most of his days attending lectures, doing hospital ward postings and being knee deep in medical studies.

However, recently third year medical student Jerry Song decided to take a run of faith in his bid to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in Malaysia.

It was not just any race.

It was the 250-kilometre ultra marathon 4 Deserts Gobi March — trekking across difficult terrains like the Tian Shan Mountain, sand dunes and of course, the Gobi Desert over a seven-day period.

At 21, he was the youngest Malaysian to finish the race where competitors also have to brave hot and cold temperatures during the run.

“I have been running since I was 16 and had only run two full marathons before this,” said the Red Ribbon Youth Club advocate when met at Universiti Malaya (UM) where he studies medicine.

“Initially, I was afraid and nervous. But it was about challenging myself and getting out of my comfort zone. I also wanted to inspire more people to come out and help those in need.”

More importantly, it was Song’s way of raising awareness about ending AIDS in Malaysia — preventing new infections, discrimination, and AIDS related deaths.

He was inspired by fellow Red Ribbon Youth advocate Jeff Lau and Malaysian AIDS Foundation (MAF) trustee Ralph Dixon, who had taken part in other ultra marathons to raise funds for HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns.

Song first got wind of running such marathons in 2015 during a cheque presentation ceremony where UM’s Medical Society campaign, Eradicate AIDS and Stigma For Equality, handed over RM10,000 to MAF.

“I found it inspiring. Something sparked inside me and motivated me to take up the challenge,” he said, adding he proceeded to sign up for the race in July last year.

Asked why he chose HIV/AIDS as a cause to champion, Song said he studied infectious diseases in his first year of medical school. It also involved him visiting hospital wards.

“The lecturer gave an in-depth talk on HIV/AIDS. I had heard about it but did not really understand it. But I felt because I was going to be a medical provider I had to be responsible and spread the knowledge.

“I met patients. The cycle is a vicious one. If you don’t care to be aware about it, the cycle continues. But you can change things through awareness. And if you are HIV positive, you need to know life doesn’t end.”

He and Lau were part of the MAF and UM medical faculty’s Hot and Cold Ultra Challenge this year. Lau had taken part in the ninth 6633 Artic Ultra in March but was disqualified after he lost an essential item.

The duo’s accomplishments is set to be celebrated at UM on July 16 during the Hot and Cold Charity Run that also seeks to raise awareness of the HIV situation among the young people. The foundation is in need of funds to carry out programmes for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Raring to go

Song started training soon after his participation in the Gobi March was confirmed.

The training regime initially involved him running 50km on a weekly basis from August to December. After that he upped the ante to 100km a week.

Besides running, he also did high-intensity interval training that improved

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his athletic capacity and condition.

Most weekdays, he ran 10km while on weekends this number would go up to 50km.

He trained at places like Pantai Klebang in Melaka, Penang Hill, Bukit Tabur and the Forest Research Institute Malaysia in Kepong.

Training had to fit in with his classes and there were days when he would run at midnight to complete his quota for the day.

His diet regime had to change with increased carbohydrate and protein intake especially a few weeks before the race where he ate more carbs in the form of six to eight meals a day.

He also took part in the Route 68 Challenge in Gombak, which was 50km, as part of his training.

The first leg of his journey began on June 15 when he left Malaysia for Guangzhou, China. From there, he travelled to Urumqi and finally arrived in Hami, which was the starting point of the race.

His backpack, which he had to run with, weighed 15 kilogrammes and consisted of items like food, clothes and walking sticks.

On June 18, it was all systems go when he ran 27km in the first leg and encountered sand dunes that were 2,000 metres high.

"You have to run fast and take bigger steps or you will just sink in the sand."

He covered 35km the second day, running up the Tian Shan Mountains where temperatures were low.

"You had to keep moving."

While the third and fourth legs were 40km and 45km respectively, the most gruelling part was yet to come.

This was running 82km across the Black Gobi desert to cross the finish line.

"We started at about 5am and kept running until a mandatory three-hour stop at 2pm. You have to stop because the sun is hot by that time. The temperature went up to 50 degrees Celcius.

"At night, the temperatures dropped and there was strong wind. The sand entered my nose and mouth, and I just had to cough it out."

He added he fell sick at this leg of the race and suffered a mild heat stroke.

"I tried to cool my body and pushed myself. In the end, I finally reached the finish line. I felt a great sense of accomplishment.

"I also had hallucinations. I kept thinking I had passed the finish line but I hadn't."

In fact, he was so exhausted he rested and missed the medal ceremony. Race director Riitta Hanninen placed the finisher's medal around his neck later.

Song touched down at KLIA on June 28 and after spending time with his family, it was time to hit the books again as he had exams the following Monday.

He had studied from his iPad in his hotel room after the run in China.

"I am planning more activities but I will need to research on them first.

"Finishing the Gobi March has motivated me to accomplish more in the future."

Did you know?

- ▶ 43 per cent of new HIV infections reported in 2016 by the Health Ministry were people aged between 13 and 29.
- ▶ Sexual transmission accounted for 84 per cent of new infections in 2016. There were 3,397 new infections last year. Overall, there have been 108,519 infections since 1986.
- ▶ A survey carried out by Durex with the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry in 2015 on Malaysian youth sexual and reproductive health found 25 per cent of respondents believed protection is not required as long as there is mutual trust between partners.
- ▶ 79 per cent of young Malaysians were aware of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) but their knowledge and understanding were limited. Many were unaware of other STIs apart from HIV/AIDS.
- ▶ One out of 10 Malaysians thought AIDS could be cured.
- ▶ One out of 10 Malaysians would not get tested and treated if they were exposed to STI risks as they consider it shameful.

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Song waves the Malaysian flag after finishing the Gobi March.

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Song (right) joins friends for his first meal cooked in a tin container.

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The medical student is motivated to organise more HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns.